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Commission on Sustainable Development acting as the preparatory committee for the World Summit on Sustainable Development
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Consideration of the Chairman's paper transmitted from the second session of the Commission acting as the preparatory committee, together with other relevant inputs to the preparatory process

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Commission on Sustainable Development acting as the preparatory committee for the World Summit on Sustainable Development the report of a meeting of national focal points on improving future national reporting to the Commission, which was held in New York on 12 and 13 February 2002 (see annex).

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Annex

Report on a meeting of national focal points on improving future national reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development, held in New York on 12 and 13 February 2002

I. Introduction

1. A meeting of national focal points on improving future national reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development was held in New York on 12 and 13 February 2002, organized by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, with generous funding support from the Governments of Norway and Finland. Fifty-two countries were invited based on regional representation and continuity in their national reporting, and thirty-six countries were represented at the meeting.[a] The meeting was convened in response to a request made by the Commission in its decision 7/5 to submit proposals on how to improve national reporting and related guidelines, as a part of the preparations for the Summit.

2. The objectives of the meeting were to: (a) assess lessons learned and exchange experience in national reporting over the last 10 years, and identify strengths and weaknesses in past national reporting procedures and approaches; (b) consider ways and means of improving and facilitating future national reporting to the Commission on progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 and associated goals (the millennium development goals and the outcome of the five-year review held in 1997); (c) formulate proposals for the Summit; and (d) promote networking among national focal points.

3. In response to the request sent from the Commission secretariat to all 149 national focal points, views and suggestions were received from 33 countries, which noted that the reporting process has generally been a useful tool for monitoring national implementation, awareness-raising and internalization of the concept of sustainable development.

4. National reporting on the implementation of Agenda 21 started in 1994 and has gone through a continuous evolution. The number of countries reporting to the Commission has increased in the process, currently totalling 137. Country profiles, which provide a brief overview, issue by issue, of the latest information on the national implementation of Agenda 21, were published for the first time for the five-year review in 1997. The second series of country profiles are being processed as inputs into the 10-year review in 2002, in parallel with the complementary national assessment reports. Since the national information web site was created in 1997, with a direct link to the United Nations web site on sustainable development, the number of daily hits has remained high and continues to increase, now averaging about 600. There is also an increased diversity of users, as reflected in the frequent inquiries the Secretariat receives.

5. A presentation was made by the Commission secretariat on the national reporting process, including an interactive database on national information on sustainable development that is currently under construction. When completed, the database will facilitate direct data entries of information by national focal points, access/queries by users worldwide, sharing of national information, data management by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Division for Sustainable Development, and preparing reports for the future sessions of the Commission.

II. Lessons learned from past reporting

A. Experience in preparing national reports

6. The reporting process has served to strengthen coordination and dialogue between government agencies and between them and the major groups, particularly in developing countries. The preparation of national reports has been a good starting point for countries' preparations for annual Commission sessions.

7. On the other hand, the momentum or political interest to provide information on the part of some Governments has gradually been declining. As

reporting preparations are time-consuming, the focal points questioned how the national information provided is used, and whether or not it has had an impact on Commission deliberations. The time has come to make clear how the reporting process contributes directly to the work of the Commission as well as to the work of countries, as input into their national decision-making.

8. There is a need to strengthen the capacities and the authority of national focal points and to give recognition or prominence to their role in coordinating relevant government agencies' inputs into national reporting. The challenge is how to mainstream reporting into national planning processes or into assessing national implementation of Agenda 21 and/or national sustainable development strategies or their equivalent.

9. Lack of understanding in some countries of the concept of sustainable development, particularly the integration of its three pillars — economic, social and environment — and the sectoral orientations of Governments in general have made integrative approaches to reporting difficult.

10. Some developing countries do not have sufficient computer hardware/software and have extremely limited access to the Internet, nor do they have established government web sites. It would be difficult for those countries to take advantage of a web-enabled database on national information or to network via the Internet with other focal points. Assistance is desperately needed in that regard.

11. The institutional memory aspect of national reporting was also highlighted as being a key in the process of monitoring progress on the national implementation of Agenda 21. Frequent turnover of government officials could be detrimental to consistent and quality reporting without some mechanism for transferring accumulated data, knowledge and experience.

12. The time required to coordinate the national reporting process varies. Some countries need six to eight months to coordinate the multiplicity of inputs from different government agencies concerned, rather than a few weeks. Other countries must translate guidelines into local languages and then translate the input received back into one of the official languages used in the national information web site of the United Nations, all of which takes time. The delay in submission of reports reflects such varying circumstances. The quality of reports has also suffered from time pressure. One solution to the problem would be for the Secretariat to start the entire process much earlier from the Secretariat side.

B. Processing national reports to the Commission

13. A number of challenges still remain; for example, the timing and type of questions formulated in guidelines to assist in the preparation of the national reports will need some adjustments. Guidelines should be more flexible to let countries express specific national interests and concerns, while maintaining certain standard formats. Countries were of the view that receiving the guidelines in the spring or earlier would facilitate meeting the deadline for the submission of national reports to the Secretariat, so the national reports could contribute to the work of the Commission. Such timing would also coincide better with countries' own statistical reporting and availability of human resources.

14. There is also a need to elaborate questions that reflect interconnectivity among the three pillars of sustainable development — environmental, social and economic. It was suggested that detailed and numerous questions be avoided, in particular on budgetary items. Providing quantitative data in the reports would be useful when preparing reports to the Commission; greater use of indicators at the national level would help in that regard.

15. National information on the United Nations sustainable development web site is currently available in English, French or Spanish. Due to financial constraints, it has not been possible to either translate that information into the other languages or to include other official United Nations languages. The goal would be to have all information available in English at a minimum.

16. It is important to strengthen the value added to the Commission national reporting. In that regard, linkages could be established between Commission reporting and convention-based national reporting for the sectoral issues covered under conventions. Commission reporting could then focus on cross-sectoral issues and the integrated aspects of

sectoral/cross-sectoral issues. National reports could also be more widely publicized.

III. Proposals for action

17. Success stories and challenges, both in future reporting to be submitted to the Commission and in national presentations to the high-level segment of the Commission sessions, could be highlighted. It is important that national presentations be reinstated as part of the plenary sessions of the high-level segment of the Commission, where ministers could learn from each other's country experiences. The criteria for selecting success stories should include a focus on integrative approaches and on new partnerships.

18. In order for Commission reporting to have value added and avoid duplication with the other numerous reporting processes with which countries are faced, future Commission reporting should focus on integrative aspects of sectoral issues (e.g., economic/social/environmental aspects or means of implementation related to sectoral issues), as well as cross-sectoral issues. The scientific community could be requested to contribute to developing methodologies for such integrative reporting.

19. The importance of regional approaches to sharing experience and national reports, networking and decision-making on common issues of sustainable development should be underlined. Regional workshops and consultations among national focal points should be held on a regular basis to enhance exchange of country experience and discussions. The Secretariat or the relevant regional commissions are requested to provide such opportunities and assist in facilitating such events.

20. Reporting should include more national impact analysis instead of reporting on accomplishments alone.

21. Many countries need assistance in developing tools for self-assessment at the national level. Feedback between the Commission secretariat and countries should be encouraged in that regard.

22. Since sustainable development indicators are further developed, quantitative data should be used in national reports, wherever relevant. The inclusion of indicators is useful for self-monitoring and assessment at the national level, as well as to track national trends in implementation of Agenda 21. Indicators reflected in national reporting should only serve self-monitoring and assessment at the national level, and should not be used for international comparison.

23. It should be made clear how the reporting contributes to the Commission and how it could be developed in order for it to better serve the global process.

24. If another multi-year programme of work is adopted by the Commission, the Secretariat should anticipate issues scheduled and make reporting requests as early as possible. The periodicity of reporting should coincide with the work programme of the Commission and the deadlines for submission should be adjusted accordingly in order to enhance the impact of decision-making by the Commission. Possible regular updating of reports should be reviewed so as to avoid information becoming outdated.

25. The reporting process, starting with formulating and sending out guidelines, should begin much earlier than in the past — in spring of the previous year. Ample time should be given for report preparations at the national level so as to allow for participatory approaches, better coordination of inputs and high-quality content.

26. Guidelines should include fewer, more clustered and integrative questions. Guidelines should be made simpler and streamlined so as to avoid repeating questions and duplicating efforts on the part of national focal points. Guidelines should invite Governments to indicate forward-looking views as to their intentions for the future and actions that need to be undertaken at various levels.

27. Guidelines should be (customized) or formulated in such a way so as to be flexible in allowing countries to reflect special national circumstances, concerns and initiatives at national, regional and local levels, while keeping the standardized format.

28. In some countries, the role of national focal points should be enhanced. Consideration could be given to designating non-environmental government agencies that play a central role in national planning and coordination and have the necessary capacity and resources as focal points.

29. There is a strong need to support capacity-building for national focal points in some countries in order to provide them with the necessary tools to

coordinate national reporting activities. The Commission secretariat, the United Nations Development Programme/capacity 21, the Global Environment Facility, the United Nations Environment Programme and/or other donors agencies are requested to consider providing technical and financial assistance in this area as part of their national-based programmes.

30. Relevant United Nations agencies are urged to develop training modules for awareness-raising of sustainable development for use, as necessary, by government officials involved in national reporting. It is important not only to maintain the institutional memory of the focal point but also to transfer know-how in reporting to successors through changes in Governments.

31. In some countries, the role of national councils or national commissions on sustainable development in supporting national focal points could be enhanced, including providing more support to the focal points in their role of coordinating inputs for reporting.

32. Regular networking between the Secretariat and national focal points and among focal points through e-mail and informal newsletters and other means of communication should be established.

33. The capacity of the Commission secretariat needs to be enhanced for better data management and processing of future reporting. Resources should be made available to the Secretariat so that national information becomes available in English for all countries, as a minimum.

34. Past submissions of national reports should be maintained by the Commission secretariat for future analysis of the national trends over time.

35. Synergies and interconnections with other reporting requirements should be improved. Better web links and coordination should be established among relevant United Nations system web sites. Governments should be invited to include national policy-making documents and hyperlinks to government sites in their electronic reporting. United Nations bodies are encouraged to make use of national reports, wherever relevant.

Notes

* The meeting was originally scheduled for 13 and 14 September 2001; due to the tragic events of 11 September, it had to be postponed and could not be held in time for the second session of the Commission acting as the preparatory committee.